

# Mostly Online Master's Reflective Practice Portfolio

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## Mostly Online Master's Reflective Practice Portfolio

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## **Introduction**

**Biography.** After my birth into a large Irish Catholic army family in Madigan Army Hospital, I grew up in Lakeland Florida. During my growing up years in Central Florida, my earliest memories are of me fantasizing about being a ballerina or having my very own art supplies that I didn't have to share with my numerous siblings.

As I grew, I became involved in several arts areas, including art, piano and classical ballet. This eventually led to me focusing on my ballet training with a professional career in mind. I graduated high school from the National Ballet Company's boarding school in Washington, DC.

My dancing career was cut short with a serious foot injury. I did not return to the field even to teach, as it was a challenging transition. Since I always had displayed interest and ability in art, I decided to attend Ringier College of Art and Design. There I achieved a BFA in graphic design. After graduation, I married my first husband who was a pastor. My goals shifted from the commercial art field to supervising a myriad of church activities including being the church piano player.

Personal family challenges resulted in me needing to return to the job market after many years being a pastor's wife and mother to my two boys. We had already moved to the Deep South to take the last church we were involved with. There were no jobs in graphic design and my skills were rusty anyway.

### **Early Days Teaching Art**

Local citizens who had taken an interest in me arranged for me to teach art at the town's art museum: the historical Marion County Museum. I truly enjoyed this first

art education position. I briefly went back to school to obtain courses I would need to teach in the public school. This was because I saw that I needed more than a part-time position could offer my family, which then consisted of my two boys and me. I never realized I would love it enough to make it my career.

My courses for certification did not require me to take any art education classes. This resulted in me having no firm ideas or plans for my art curriculum. I resolved to study and take any courses or workshops I could to get a grasp on what I should be teaching in class. In my museum art classes, it had seemed appropriate to focus on studio skills, which I was well prepared for with my art school background. In the public school, it quickly became obvious that more was needed.

After some time, I became skilled in teaching to the national visual art standards in the DBAE style I learned from my on the job studies. While I thought this approach was good for a time, I began to notice that it did not meet the needs of my students in a satisfying way.

### **My City**

After transferring twice from elementary and middle school situations, I ended up at North Vista Elementary. I have taught art education here for the past thirteen years. The school is located in Florence SC, a small city of around 31,000 people.

Approximately 79% of our city's population lives in poverty, compared with SC state statistics of 66%. About half of Florence's population is African American. The remaining is mostly white, with 3% other minorities.

Only in the past decade have we begun to emerge as a city as strong supporters of the arts. In the last few years, much exciting artistic headway has arrived with new local studios, arts associations, exhibits and performances.

## **My School**

North Vista Elementary is an arts-focused school and was a South Carolina ABC ([Arts in the Basic Curriculum](#)) site for many years. I help manage aspects of the school-wide arts program, as well as helping write the grants that provide funding. Standards-based instruction in visual art, music, dance and drama are offered as part of our students' education. We are an inner city Title I school and serve a neighborhood student population; many students walk to school.

***My students.*** My art students come from two different worlds. One is a very different life world than I am familiar with. Most live in single-parent families, with their mother, grandmother, or other relative. Some are in foster care. The average free/reduced lunch rate is about 93%, and about 91% of students are African American. Few parents or guardians have attended college and most have blue collar, entry-level, or no employment. Surveys show that few (or no) opportunities other than at school for the arts are available for our students (these statistics may not include Montessori students).

When we recently worked on our memory room art unit<sup>1</sup>, more wrote about memories of death or violence in the home than any other theme. I have come to

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<sup>1</sup> see essay two for more details

realize that for many of them, seeing beyond getting the pair of shoes they want is as far into the future that they seem to understand.

My art classes are K-4 through sixth grade. There are approximately seven hundred students enrolled at this time. A public school version of the Montessori program, from a 3-year-old program through grade six is also taught.

This creates a dichotomy, with many students who elect the magnet Montessori program coming from higher socioeconomic levels than the rest of the school. For example, one of my students in upper Montessori has lived around the globe; in contrast, many students enrolled in our traditional program may live near a nearby boarded-up crack house.

### **My Classroom**

My artroom is organized around three spaces: seven tables for students where they work in groups of around four, the SMART Board screen and projector area at the front for instruction and discussion, and my desk & storage areas. The room is small, and we are very crowded when I have large classes.

I have the class rules posted; we discuss and practice the procedures and rules at the beginning of the school year. This has seemed necessary, as I teach hundreds of students during the course of a week.

I also have a posted system of rewards and consequences. My students love earning rewards for achieving seven stars on my class behavior/ procedures chart. One of the consequences of repeated noncompliance to our class rules is being seated at a

desk away from the team tables. Students much prefer working in groups and this can be an effective consequence.

I typically open each class by briefly having them explain what we have been studying or working on. I present new steps or techniques to them. I give opportunities for them to practice skills. As they begin to work, I walk around the room to assist or provide proximity control.

Most of my units now start with class discussion of relevant contemporary artwork and artists. I pick out the big ideas, artists and artwork, and assessments ahead of time. However, I leave room for students to help provide the focus to the themes that I pick.

This is different than before I started my OSU studies. Then, I would study the district's DBAE-style visual art curriculum and plan my units around it with a scope and sequence usually before the school year started.

As is suggested here, I have been a bit over-organized and over-structured in the past. During the past two years, this has slowly started to change. I now take much more of a facilitator role, with teamwork and student choice dominating much more of my teaching style.

In the past, I have been involved with the South Carolina Art Education Association. I attended yearly conferences and served on the board as the web editor for a time. Presently, I am not on the board. However, I have enjoyed presenting two of my OSU units at the past two fall SCAEA conferences.

I have long felt as if my place and work has been at this school working with these children. I believe that my OSU studies have given me tools to now teach art for meaning making, not just for skills, knowledge, and exhibits. These are encouraging and refreshing winds of change into the artroom and into our lives.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Teaching Artmaking with Meaning**

The teaching experience I selected to write about first is teaching artmaking with meaning from Dr. Sydney Walker's class. I chose this experience because it has dramatically changed my teaching style and practice. Teaching artmaking with meaning has four key ideas to me. These include teaching with big ideas, incorporating contemporary artists and their practice, the use of visual culture, and adapting the teaching to the school.

A more detailed explanation of these concepts follows. By using big ideas, students find that artmaking is more than creating an interesting design; artmaking becomes an expression of important ideas related to their own life and the lives of others (Walker, 2001). Teaching artmaking using big ideas results in students making personal, relevant connections, retaining information, and engaging in higher-order thinking skills. Next, art educators need to incorporate the work of contemporary artists and their relevance to contemporary culture; this is key for students perceiving the relevance of artmaking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Art teaching for meaning-making includes using visual culture a part of the art curriculum. Our students live in a visual world, where their lives are surrounded with images, texts and artmaking of all kinds. They need to be able to make connections, understand and analyze hidden messages and agendas, as well as appreciate a variety of diverse ideas, cultures, and styles. Including visual art in the curriculum will enable this process.

I appreciated how my students obviously enjoyed making connections to their lives and would find meaning in so many ways during the past two years I have begun to practice teaching artmaking for meaning. My students have opened up, both personally and in their studio art as we have learned together about big ideas, contemporary artists and their practices, and visual culture.

Teaching artmaking for meaning needs to be adapted to fit the students and the school setting. I have endeavored to be sensitive to the needs of the mostly minority inner-city students that I teach. Every school and every community is unique, and one teaching style or strategy will not adequately fit all schools. I planned the big ideas in advance to appeal to the interests of my students.

One example of this is where my fifth graders studied the big idea of Social Justice. They focused on how we personally can make a difference using our gifts and talents, like the Harlem Renaissance artists did in so many ways. My students are always interested in anything concerning civil rights, and black history, so they were hooked from the start of the unit.

I allowed them to develop their own ideas into a collage and writing project about how they can make a difference. This strategy has worked well. One student wrote of how his collage illustrated how he would make lots of money using his sports talent and then use it to help an old lady in his neighborhood.



### **Memory Room Unit**

I decided to examine how using big ideas has impacted my students. I planned a focus group meeting and planned to use action research methods. I selected third graders who had recently finished their Memory Room project. Before discussing the action research results, I will explain the unit. First, we focused on the big idea of Place: *"How can a place, a room/ home carry memories and stories from the past?"* We began by discussing the art of Pepon Osorio and Kerry James Marshall.

They especially responded to *"Tina's House"* (Art 21; PBS, 2010) by Osorio. Many students discussed how they also either knew someone or they themselves, were the victims of a house fire where the house was destroyed. In our county, it is common for there to be around three house fires a month where the Red Cross is called in because of the extent of devastation. They also responded to *"Souvenir II"* by Marshall (Art 21; PBS, 2010), which depicts a living room with an angel observing the scene. The many references to funerals, and memories of those who have passed on in the artwork were of great interest to them.

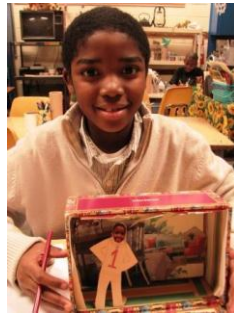
We spent time writing about a memory and the place it was associated with in our lives. Many students shared their writings with the class. Then, they constructed assemblages of the house and room using recycled cigar boxes. The outside was the house, and the inside was the room. They used photos of themselves, collaged images and personal drawings for the assemblages. The card with the memory was placed somewhere in the box. We had a class critique where we displayed the houses all over the room and spent time viewing each one. Students helped me to videotape the interviews where they shared both the box and their memories with the viewing audience and then answered questions from the audience. The student response was overwhelming.

The focus group consisted of participants from Ms. Padgett and Ms. Daise' art classes. I chose them because they experienced one of the more dramatic contrasts in my emerging teaching style: the journey from DBAE to teaching with big ideas. These two classes have been more verbal and expressive, so it was an easy choice for me. They recently shared in our class art critiques and interviews their own journey in personal meaning making and connections to their lives that they have made this year with their art.

**Focus group students.** I used three basic criteria to select the focus group participants. First, I included both their ability and willingness to talk about their art, as evidenced in the recent class interviews. Next, I wanted to pick at least two students who have demonstrated a tendency to be the "naysayer" or devil's advocate. Finally, I included students who were successful in the studio portion of the memory room

project as well as a couple who were less successful to hear from the underachieving group.

I will describe briefly the students that I selected using the described criteria. Jaylen is a student who is both verbal and enthusiastic, but has two different sides. He can be a model art student one class and then be down or misbehaving the next class. He created his box to be reminiscent of the room where he spent time with his grandfather whom he loved so much.



Jaylen's Memory Box

Rhashanae's memory room was the only really remarkable work she has ever accomplished for me. Her quietness and shyness hides her intelligence and originality that was revealed during the course of this unit. Brianna and Desteni are both very smart but tend to be non-compliant and negatively vocal if asked to do anything they do not want to do.

Sha'Diamond is a low achieving student and can sometimes be unfocused and noncompliant as well. Alexis is a very positive and high achieving student. She came alive during the memory room project. She spoke of how much she enjoyed getting to express her own ideas.

***"I like my own ideas best!"***. The consensus of the focus group was that students loved using big ideas in art class. They also enjoy writing about and sharing their ideas and feelings with the class and with me. Brianna and Desteni seemed to feel that it was harder and scarier to have to use your own ideas than to be told what to do.

Sha'Diamond said art class was easier when I told them what to do. I can see their point as it is more challenging to have to think up your own ideas than to apply someone else's. All found me to be warmer and more empathetic and approachable than I believe students used to view me.

In past years, in spite of previous efforts of mine to replace passive interest with passion and motivation, it seemed an uphill climb and a losing battle. This was before teaching with meaning. Now, they are using big ideas in art class and the result has been a coming alive of these students. Instead of polite but formal interest at best, they are excited and motivated. They now see me this way as well. My focus group mentioned that I was happy and excited to teach art and that they liked that.

Alexis said, *"I like my own ideas best! We get to use our own ideas, instead of just doing what the teacher says"*. Jaylin said, *"Yeah it's different, because like last year, you gave us directions and stuff but this year you want us to use our own ideas and feelings. Last year you TOLD us what to do... now you want us to use our own ideas and stuff. You're happy; you're excited to teach us all kinds of things. My memory box room, I just love it..."*

## Writing in Art Class

*"You's a Fun Person"*. They are even excited about writing in art class, which is an important part of teaching with big ideas. About being asked to write about the personal memories associated with her memory box assemblage, Sha'Diamond said, "You can just say what you want to say [when you write], you don't gotta say it out loud, or say it in front of the class; it's a good thing, writing our feelings, how we feel, in art to you".

Another student said: *"You's a fun person; you let us get all our bad feelings out; others are not like what you do... they don't let us express our feelings how we want to do it...you let us get our feelings out"*. This emotional climate is very different from third grade art in previous years. In the past, my third graders would come to art class and seem a bit distracted and spaced out. Now excitement and energy are the most common climate of the classes.

As I reflect on the past two years, I have focused on teaching for meaning using big ideas. Many things went well for me, but especially in the arena of student passion and the many powerful connections they made to their lives and their art. My first grade and Lower Montessori students focused on the big idea of Humans and the Earth; *Saving the Earth: It's in my hands*.

The younger students have assumed ownership of this issue; they love explaining how we need to help the rain forest animals by not making them into rugs or coats. Tears were in some of the little girl's eyes as they expressed how the tigers need our

help. Their emotional responses to the plight of our ecosystems have encouraged me greatly.

In past years, this age group would study units based on artists like Rousseau's jungle paintings. They were passive in their involvement with his art, I must confess. Their biggest involvement then was getting to interact with the jungle animal toys I would place on their tables as they worked. Now, their enthusiasm is pervasive and contagious!

We began by discussing the work of several conservation artists, as well as some visual culture depicting posters of environmental issues. We also looked at some photos that showed problems of the animal world due to humans. Their class discussion of what they perceive as serious issues that deeply interest them carried over into their artwork. Their art reflected their involvement and interest as well as they created murals of the rain forest animals. They made sure to include what their animals needed for their habitat homes, like clean water, food, and clean air.

Other successful units my elementary students have studied include: Place (3<sup>rd</sup> graders), and Identity (4<sup>th</sup> graders and Upper Montessori). The Social Justice unit (5<sup>th</sup> graders) will be described in more detail in the art criticism essay. Humans and Conservation: *Going Green* (6<sup>th</sup> graders) was also studied.

### **My *Going Green* Unit**

Lesson one: *Can Critters*. The *Going Green* unit consists of two studio lessons. In the first lesson of this unit, the class first interpreted sculptures by contemporary

artists that used trash or recycled materials to convey their concerns for conserving the earth's resources. This part of lesson one is discussed in essay two, *Teaching Art Criticism*. Then, students created *Can Critters* sculptures in teams, which were made of recycled aluminum cans and then placed in our media center on display.



*Caniphant*

Team 5's Recycled Can Sculpture

Students were interviewed about their Can Critters on our in-school TV show, *Vista Alive!* Students described what they learned about conservation issues and how they applied their ideas in their art. *Caniphant* was the title of an elephant-style can critter made by team 5 that was featured on the morning show.

*Lesson two: saving the trees.* The second lesson in the Go Green unit used the theme of paper recycling and is called *Saving the Trees*. For this lesson, sixth grade participated in a modified service-learning project. After researching the theme, students wrote about their research and how artists have used conservation concerns in their work. We first focused discussion on the topic of saving trees. I asked them the question "*What would a world without trees be like?*" We brainstormed this topic and



then discussed how various artists expressed a plethora of green ideas, such as H. A. Schult in his fascinating *Trash People* (Dangerous Minds, 2010). I found it interesting that students were even more moved describing the trash in their own neighborhood than when they were responding to the artwork.

Then they designed and painted paper-recycling cans. Sixth graders only recently finished up painting their go green themes on the paper recycling cans. They worked on the cans in groups, painting the scenes with acrylics. They used a sketch that was chosen from one of the group members by a voting process.

Using a democratic voting process was a relatively new idea for me. In the past, I hesitate to admit that I probably would have decided for them which picture would be used for each can.



De'Jae and Nikoya Painting their Can

When finished, we placed the recycling cans in various classrooms around our school. My pairing of big ideas with service learning is not a new idea, but one shown by research to be very helpful to both the students as well as to teachers (like me) who may be experiencing these ideas themselves for the first time (Buffington, 2007).

They worked in teams for this service project of designing and placing painted recycling cans throughout the school. I have not had a class before this year just

create one artwork per group and do it in a cooperative teamwork style. I think I felt before that I needed to keep things “orderly” with my naturally disorderly inner-city bunch. I was thrilled with the results with my pilot-class sixth graders. They used strategies of teamwork, group-regulated task/job assignments, and voting as a class on major ground rules.

During the first part of the recycling can painting, where they were sketching with permanent markers and pencils their designs onto the cans, I was getting nervous. Their first efforts were sloppy, chaotic, and not well thought-out. I had hoped that the planning time we spent where they had to create and vote on sketches before painting time would have helped, but we had some rough spots.

I volunteered to re-spray their cans in spots where there were issues and help them to re-draw some of the difficult parts or text. My students have normally been in the past examples of the “learned helplessness” type of response to difficulty. In another words, having taught them or their siblings for more than a decade, I expected them to say “*YES! We REALLY want you to fix the cans!*” I have often received that type of response in other situations.

Instead of wanting help, Brooke said emphatically “*You...you....want to work on OUR cans?*” She looked horrified. Another boy said, “*That’s...OUR....work!*”. No one wanted my help. To my recollection, this had never happened before. I was in shock and said, “*Well, okay, we have decided as a class that I will NOT help paints your cans. If you want me to re-spray anything you may ask me and then you can try again*”. They were pleased with this democratic process. I overheard one student say, “*I love*

*my can...".* This sense of ownership (Stringer, 2004), is new in my class and I feel it is a very positive and special change.

Since my art students were not already exposed to a knowledge-based approach model of teaching that is the essence of teaching with big ideas (Walker 2001), I have had to proceed with wisdom and patience. In the past, they were accustomed to my DBAE art curriculum; copying an artist's style, creating art based on elements and principles or to following directions on the board used to be the norm.

One way this was addressed was through assigning each year a theme, like I wrote about above. In conjunction with my students, the focus of the theme would emerge. I typically would have chosen the theme ahead of time, but presented a wide variety of artworks to support them. Students would be naturally more drawn to discuss some than other ones. We would then as a class, further develop the big idea. I would refine and redefine their ideas into my list of essential questions, as the unit would progress. This is a change in the way I develop art curriculum.

During the *Go Green* unit, students were onboard with my preselected big idea and essential questions. For other units such as the third grade's Memory unit, I went back and refocused the unit based on their interest in personal memories of places.

Before teaching with big ideas, my students enjoyed art in a detached sort of manner. They would cooperate on most occasions in a polite, positive, but dispassionate manner. Teaching with big ideas has changed this in many classes and in many of my students. A "sense of passion" is an important element in effective learning environments (Stringer, 2004).

## My Identity Unit

This was especially true when 4<sup>th</sup> graders studied the big idea of Identity. This new passion was displayed when 4<sup>th</sup> grader Mahogany spoke about what symbols she would use to depict how she felt on the inside, hidden from what her classmates could see. She dramatically said, “*I will use a heart that is broken* [to symbolize a part of my identity that is hidden] *because my heart is broken* [over my family]; *I don’t ever see my mom and my dad*”. This, from a student who was only known to me previously as one looking for an avenue to act out, was a moving experience for me. On countless occasions, I have rehearsed this moment in my mind. It actually became an epiphany of sorts for me. I knew my teaching would never be the same.

When the 4<sup>th</sup> grade studied the big idea of identity, they first participated in an art criticism lesson about artists who depict aspects of their identity in their art such as Lucas Samaras, Frida Kahlo, and Cornell. I will discuss this part of the unit in greater detail during my art criticism essay. We completed identity surveys and brainstormed ideas and symbols that would communicate how we see ourselves on the outside as well as on the inside. We then painted a self-portrait that included personally meaningful symbols. Next, we designed identity boxes called Inside-Outside Boxes (Barrett, 1997 & The Kennedy Center ArtsEdge, 2010).

We talked about the use of metaphors, allegories and symbols. A discussion of what we might hide or reveal was held. We used a peer assessment writing aspect as well as a personal writing aspect at the conclusion. Students were given an assessment rubric to help them self-assess their artwork and writing. Some students were video

interviewed and spoke about what the images and art on their box meant. More details can also be found in essay two.

I had to bring the boxes to their class when they were dry as students were at the last day of art classes before a break. I was truly moved when Jada gave a shout of joy when I walked in the door to her classroom as she had never previously seemed to care about anything she created.

Some things did not go as well, however. In my Upper Montessori art class that also used the big idea of Identity, I noticed a sense of responding only on the surface to the questions and issues raised by the unit both in their verbal responses and in their written reflections. The Montessori wing of our school is mostly composed of students who are from different socioeconomic situations than the rest of my inner-city school; I think I had made assumptions that they would surpass my other fourth graders but that did not happen. I reflected on what had in fact caused results that were less than the best.

I decided some of the surface results were from things I don't have control over. These include the fact that I only see my art classes for thirty minutes once a week this year. Also, the Upper Montessori class time slot is unfortunately scheduled in a time slot that frequently gets cut. Their assigned class schedule is often on a day off, or an assembly, or something else besides class. This has resulted in rushed, surface results. Another reason for this problem may be a willingness on my part to hurry through when I know that we don't have much time. I have been settling for less than the best. I think some action research to address these issues with my school would help.

Some other issues I feel the need to improve are my tendency to want to run class discussions instead of acting more as a facilitator. However, I have improved and am now aware of the need to encourage students to respond and not to tell them how to think but help them to think things out for themselves. I also noticed in my focus group that I talked too much and did not always allow enough wait time for answers.

In conclusion, some new strategies have been particularly successful for me. These are working in teams, having the class vote on ground rules and voting as groups to decide a variety of issues. Allowing classes to help decide media choices is another issue I had never tried before this year. The student enthusiasm this method inspires is refreshing.

Inviting student input in refining essential questions and encouraging them to define where the big idea is going has been successful as well as an adventure. I never know in advance where they will go, or how they are going to see the issue. For example, third graders focused on interpreting *Tina's House* because of their personal experience with house fires; this was a path I never thought about before they brought it up. The focus on memories (like a past house fire) was student-created and directed; this in essence shaped and defined the successful unit for the class.

Often these past two years, I have taken time to explain to interested classroom teachers and staff what the students are working on and why. I have too often encountered a glazed-over blank look, and then a sweet "*Oh, that's nice.*" Really, they meant well, but I am sure they don't get it yet. I think that they still believe that if the artwork doesn't look good over a sofa, it must not be very good. I can see a need for

teacher in-services that might educate our staff on contemporary art, artists, and their practices and philosophies.

Some might say that one needs to have a new fully equipped roomy art room to achieve significant student achievement in the arts. My physical classroom environment has not changed; I still teach in a too small but well-equipped art room. Although my physical room is no different, my teaching has taken a major paradigm shift. I have evaluated my past teaching experience, and compared it to how I now teach. My teaching practice has changed dramatically from a structured semi-DBAE philosophy to teaching artmaking to make meaning. I act as more of a facilitator of student learning instead of as a traditional instructor.

I think I am a much more effective art teacher, as well as more satisfied with the results. I feel closer to my students as well. Past barriers are much less obvious to me and I believe, to my students. Since I am a blond white person with an Irish Catholic family heritage, my life world couldn't be more different than my student's life worlds. Most are African American; many live across from abandoned buildings used for dubious purposes. Never has it been less of a problem than now, when they feel they are being heard, listened to, and that their ideas matter to me. In fact, their ideas now shape both our class, artwork, and I trust, our future as contributing and successful citizens of this democratic society.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Teaching Art Criticism**

The main idea of *Teaching Art Criticism* is that persons of any age can interpret art by practicing meaningful, reflective thought and discussion about the artwork. It is not necessary to be an art critic, historian or art educator because to interpret art is to make it personally meaningful. Finding personal meaning in the artwork by applying principles of art criticism is the ultimate goal for the viewer, and for our students. A good interpretation is one that provides answers to questions brought up by the viewers (Barrett, 2003).

In the art education curriculum, art criticism can cover a broad spectrum of areas. These may include narratives, poetry and other written discourse about the chosen artwork. Art criticism principles can be transferred and applied when reflecting on many different art forms such as architecture, dance, or music (Barrett, 2003). Students need to participate in thoughtful interpretation of visual culture such as various media, movies, cartoons and commercial advertising. Historical artworks should be contemplated and studied as well. We can "*seek to build personal meaning about it for our lives today. What did it mean to them, then; what might it mean to me, now?*" (Barrett, 2003, p. 137). Finally, students need to engage in meaningful critiques and interpretation of their own as well as their peer's artwork.

I learned that there are many principles of art interpretation that revolve around asking questions of the viewer or oneself such as "*What do you see?*" "*What does it mean and what evidence do you have to support your interpretation?*" "*What do others, especially art critics/ historians as well as the artist say about it?*" I will examine



how I have applied all of these new principles in the units that follow, with attached examples.

These principles also include the idea that artworks are always *about* something. Next, one needs to examine the subject matter, the medium, form and context in order to arrive at meaning in an artwork. I learned there could be many interpretations. Multiple interpretations are better than one, but some are better than others. Then, there is no single “right” interpretation to an artwork. Finally, I found that good interpretations “*invite us to see for ourselves and continue on our own*” (Barrett, 2003, p. 198). These principles were a new approach to teaching art criticism for me.

### **My Art Criticism Teaching Practice**

I will discuss my three most successful units that included application of a variety of these principles. I begin with the art criticism portion of my favorite, the Identity unit. Next is a description of the art criticism portion of the Memory Room project, which was based on the big idea of Place. Finally, I will discuss the art criticism portions of my Social Justice unit.

***My identity unit.*** An example of my use of art interpretation in the classroom is the Identity Unit designed for my fourth graders. The unit was birthed during my artmaking studio course where I created my own [personal art based on the big idea of Identity](#) which I shared with my classes. The Identity unit has several different lessons, which include art criticism, brainstorming, an identity survey, interpretive writing, the

studio activity of creating Inside-Outside boxes, and peer assessment writing. I will only discuss the relevant parts of the unit here.

I realized that I was focused too often in the past on the crafting of the product, not in facilitating meaning making. To help change that, I wanted to introduce my fourth grade classes to the big idea of expressing personal identity in art. We started using my new principles of art criticism to interpret contemporary self-portraits that use symbols, metaphors and allegorical images to communicate personal identity.

Our district curriculum includes the study of portrait styles by a variety of artists as well as studio portrait drawing; however, my students need to make meaning with their art, not just to draw and study various historical portraits. In the past, I have noticed how difficult it was for my fourth graders to relate to or interpret traditional artworks that had no real connection to their lives. I have observed that at this age they are always interested in *themselves* their lives, families, and daily events. Since “*art curriculum should be rooted in the students’ life experiences and interests*” (Gude in NAEA, 2011), this lesson was a good choice for me to begin applying my new principles of art criticism.


I started the art criticism lesson with the class seated on the rug in the part of the room reserved for our SMART Board lessons. The PowerPoint lesson showed artworks by Kahlo, Samaras, and Cornell. I call on Erin, who clicks on Kahlo’s artwork *The Little Deer* (Kahlo in The Art Club, 2011), to enlarge it.

She talked about how "it's a deer with a girl's head." I say, "tell me more". She responds, "The deer with the girl head is Kahlo...*her husband had abused her... The arrows...symbolize that she is a victim*". I told her this was a great answer. I felt that she demonstrated that she knew how Kahlo used symbols to show aspects of her identity (being a victim; and abusive relationship) by this response that went beyond past information, since we have previously discussed Kahlo's life.

In the past, I would have merely concentrated on having them connect to how the deer allegory symbolized Kahlo's life in many ways. Now, I wanted to encourage them to make personal connections to the artwork. So, I asked them what animal they would use to symbolize themselves.

I call on Devonte, who says "*I will show myself as a cheetah because they are fast and they are predators*". I asked "why?", and he said, "Because I am a fast runner... And because cheetahs are predators and I am mad at my friends...we're fighting." I said I thought this was a good answer, showing he had learned how artists use symbols and applying it to his life in a meaningful way. Interpreting the artwork in light of a personal connection was a major change in the way I now teach art criticism.

Students also used an art criticism writing assignment in my upper Montessori art classes but I did not get as insightful of responses using the writing assignments.



Interpreting Art: Frida Kahlo

Seat # 76 Date 10-4-12  
Student Name: Stephanie Jones

Directions: Answer these questions about the artwork you are viewing. Use a complete sentence. Explain what in the artwork you are referring to by drawing lines to the object or symbol you are writing about. You will share your writing with the class later.

I. What do you think the artwork might be about?  
I think that this artwork is about a girl showing how strong she is with the real things going on in her life.  
Why do you think so?  
Because it is showing that she is still sharing things even with all the arrows in her body and her bleeding everywhere.

II. Name 3 objects, symbols or images in the artwork. Tell what you think they might mean and WHY you think so (Refer to the artwork by making a line and numbering the items to answer).

1. Branch I think that she put this because it shows that maybe someone like inside her feel broken inside.
2. Arrows show that she is so very strong in her life.
3. The hand might show that her life is really dark and nobody really talks anymore to her.

Stephanie's Writing Worksheet

***The self-portrait boxes of Lucas Samaras.*** I called on Shakaira, who clicked on *Self-Portrait Box* by Samaras. "Tell me about this artwork" I say. She says she sees "I see a hand". I say, "Tell me more". She responds, "*it's trapped in a box*". I ask her what this means, and she had a blank look. I continued with, "*Why would someone place a trapped hand in their art?*" She goes on to say "He's scared...."

I was glad she seemed to connect the box with who Samaras was as a person. I also felt she was saying the stuck hand represented feelings of being trapped and scared. She has trouble articulating her ideas and values the appearance of toughness, never sharing in class discussions. This was a first for her and I was happy she articulated a short but meaningful answer.

I asked the class "*What kinds of experiences would cause you to express yourself as a trapped hand reaching out of a box?*" Alicia said, "That she's having *hard times* in her life". I told her I thought this was an excellent answer. I ask the class

"what would *you* use to represent how you feel about your life?" Desiree says, "I would use a spider *because they can kill whoever they want!*" The class and I were shocked into silence with her hysterical remark. I quickly moved on and thanked her for responding so honestly. I referred her to guidance before the day was over. The guidance counselor informed me she was already meeting with this young lady. I had a fresh revelation how we interpret art in light of our identity, kind of like the Rorschach ink blots.



Marquell's Identity Box

Before my OSU studies, I never had attempted to use such an enigmatic figure (Samaras) that I did not really understand myself. Neither have I asked students to interpret such art in light of their own life. Now, I look forward to experiment in the future with other contemporary artists that present interpretation challenges.

Reflecting on my students' interpretations of symbolic self-portraits, I appreciated the depth of their responses. They exceeded what I might have predicted in their responses. I thought they did as good a job on a basic level as an art critic might have done.

When we finished the Inside-Outside boxes, we interpreted them using an adaptation of the art criticism worksheet that uses a peer writing assessment (Barrett, 1997, p. 101). Students first wrote their interpretation of how they used imagery, text

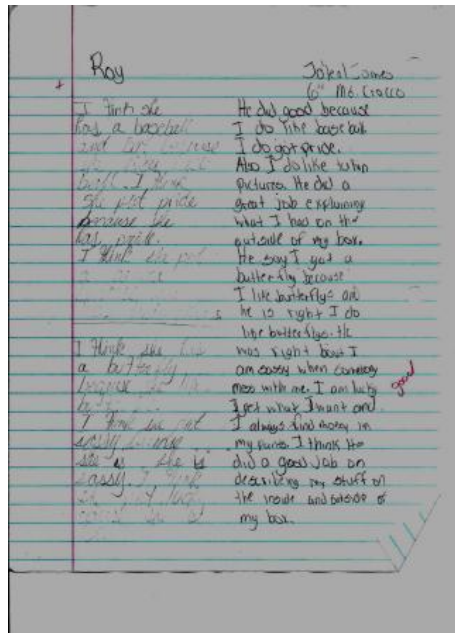
and objects to symbolize how they think their identity is portrayed on the outside. Then, they repeated the process for the inside of their boxes. At the end, the student artist wrote a statement about how well the peer had interpreted their artwork. I felt this would be a good exercise for my students as they could then see how well they were actually communicating what they thought they were communicating.

Johnathon had placed an image of a lion on the inside of his box; Jaquan who peer-assessed Johnathon's box, wrote that he thought Johnathon's box showed he must be scared of lions. When Johnathon read this, he wrote for his conclusion that he wasn't scared of lions, but that his personality was *like* a lion. I think he now sees that he was not very clear on his message, and that he could have clarified this in his art.

This is an improvement from my past writing critiques in art class where I would ask the students to assess their own work. In the past, I would often have them self-assess in writing their artwork's formal qualities, media techniques, and craftsmanship or to discuss an artist we studied in the lesson. I had seldom asked them to assess what they were trying to communicate and how well they communicated their ideas. The peer assessment clearly shows the students where a failure to communicate may lie.

I still felt we had room to grow in the future with using peer assessments. Many of the writings were accurate, but very superficial in the comments. For example, Jada [writing on Caroline's identity box] wrote "*Caroline likes kittens because she put an image of a kitten on her box*". She did like kittens, but I was hoping for a more in-depth response from the writings. Something like how "Caroline's personality was

playful like a kitten's" would have been good, I thought. The other student's papers gave very similar types of responses so I won't quote them.



*Mostly Surface Responses like Ja'leal's  
Using the Peer Assessments*

I think the peer writing assessments were still a positive part of this unit. Too often in the past, I have had the student artists hold up their work and talk about what they have created, with a couple of peer comments. The peers of the student artists have not been the focal point. That is not an authentic task because in reality, an artist is seldom present to offer the one true interpretation of an artwork. Since criticism is for an audience; "informed discourse about art for the purpose of increasing understanding and appreciation of art" (Barrett, 2003). I now feel that I am starting to accomplish this goal.

The peer writing method of assessment also helped my students to stop seeing so much of what is "wrong" in their work, and what the class "good artists" do right,

and instead start reflecting on what their peers' artwork means. I did not hear my usual litany of "I don't like what I made" or "I didn't do a good job; I'm not a good artist" I felt refreshed to see that the Identity unit and my peer writing assessment put an end to this refrain. This was a first for me.

*Art criticism and the big idea of place.* "To interpret a work of art is to understand it in language", and "to make sense of our responses by putting them into words" (Barrett, 2003, p. 200). These two quotes remind me that it is important to continue to have our students both discuss and write about art. The work is not really interpreted if it is not expressed into meaningful words, and therefore, students have not sufficiently found meaning. I have especially enjoyed my third grade student's written and verbal interpretations based on their Place unit this year.

We initially focused on the big idea of Place: "*How can a place, a room/ home carry memories and stories from the past?*" In the first essay, I discuss more about how the studio activity and the big idea were used in this unit. The first lesson of the unit starts with my third graders interpreting the art of Kerry James Marshall and Pepòn Osorio. I will only discuss the part concerning Marshall at this time.

*Marshall's art.* Third Graders especially responded to "*Souvenir II*" by Marshall, which depicts a living room with an angel observing the scene. In this painting the artist shows his respect to the Civil Rights movement. This work features a middle-class living room with an ordinary African-American woman who has become an angel.



She serves “a domestic order populated by the ghosts of Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy... and other heroes of the 1960s.” (Art21; PBS, 2010).

We never discussed Marshall’s background, which resulted in his focusing on racial stereotyping and other civil rights issues. My reason at that time was that I did not want to lead the unit into a focus on social justice/ civil rights. Now, I believe that I might have missed an opportunity and even bypassed the point of his art. I could have shared his civil rights focus with my third graders and let them decide if we should use family memories or civil rights issues for our big idea. Next time I will keep this in mind.

I ask the class “what is it [Souvenir II] about?” Ah’janet said, “I see flowers”. I ask, “What else do you see?” I was hoping she would select a more meaningful element, like the angel or the stamps of deceased leaders on the wall. She says “It’s a living room with flowers”. I then redirect the class by asking a leading question, “What is different in the picture from normal?” Bobby says, “There a lady with wings.” Someone calls out “it’s an angel”. I ask, “Why is there an angel in this picture?” Calle says, “She’s thinking about the people on the wall... I see Martin Luther King... She’s thinking about him.” She is the first to pick up the reference to the images on the wall (heroes of the civil rights movement). Tenej says, “Me, too! I see more people who have died! She must be remembering them.” I ask the class “Why is her memory on the walls and [stamped] into the ceilings? Nathan says “She must be thinking about them, when they were alive...” I offer, “It must be a special memory for her for them

to appear on the walls. Do you think the pictures of these people are REALLY on the walls of the room?" Layla says, "No, she is just thinking about them..."

I ask my class "Can you think of a room you have been in that when you think about that place, or go there, a special memory comes to your mind?" Hands go up; I call on Rhashanae, who says "My home; my family, when I come home" I hope for some deeper answers, so I ask for more hands. Thomas says "My grandma's house" "What about it?" I ask. He doesn't quite know what to say so I reflect on how to go forward.

I then shared with the class a recollection about my grandma. When I think about a special place, I think about her living room where we always played as children. It was beautifully decorated and she always got out of the attic a box of special toys she kept just for when we visited. Then I told them she had passed away. My classes loved hearing this personal story.

From this point on, all they wanted to share seemed to be memories of their loved ones who have died. They also shared what they wore to the funerals, including the color and style of the outfits and kinds of shoes. My students see a lot of death and routinely attend funerals of their relatives, extended family and neighbors. It is a part of their lives and a part of their culture. Since it seemed important to them, I let the lesson continue to focus on memories of their departed loved one(s) even as I encouraged them to share other kinds of positive memories as well.

Previous to my OSU studies, I probably would have not allowed them to keep this morbid-seeming focus but would have “helped them choose” something I would consider “more appropriate”. Now, I allowed them their thematic choice but encouraged them to create their boxes without any appearances of violence or death. The result was that my third graders worked on these boxes for almost three months.

It consumed much time as we first talked about the artworks. We wrote and shared our written memory cards, created our room interiors using mixed media, designed a figure that looked like us that included a photo of us. Then, we collaged the front of the boxes to look like the exterior of our memory room house. Even as we finally spent several lessons on our critiques and interviews, their attention span never wavered. This was remarkable because in the past, keeping them focused on a lesson that ran more than even a few weeks was very challenging and frustrating. I think it was because they were genuinely interested in their ideas, albeit memories of deceased loved ones.



Isaiah's Memory Box

**A new democratic process.** During the final interviews, three students per class were chosen for interviews by a class majority vote after we spent time spent

touring the room, exploring each box and card. This was a change in the way I conducted class critiques. In the past, I would have either asked for volunteers to present or chosen them myself. I never previously let the class decide. Before we voted, I discussed with them how when we toured the art around the room, we needed to find something good about each one.

Chosen students were to present their box to their class for discussion during an interview that was videotaped. I had students videotape the sessions; they were thrilled if chosen for either task.

When Kareem was interviewed, he said "I created my bedroom in my old house... It's in Virginia." Nathan asked "why did you leave?" Kareem responds "Because my grandma died." Nylaishia says, "I have a question! HOW did you say she died?" Kareem says "She was driving...Had an accident" Nylaishia continues with, "Was she *texting* when she was driving?" When I listened to this, it was all I could do not to crack a smile. Kareem answers her "No, she wasn't texting, *Aunt Rachael* was driving.... SHE was texting..."

Rashad is not yet satisfied and asks "Sooo...she didn't see the car coming at her because she was texting and it hit her?" Kareem says "Yes; she was texting and the car hit her". Nylaishia, not to be outdone, asks "was she *wearing her seatbelt* when she was hit?" Kareem said that yes she was, but she hit her head on the windshield. They all were so intent during this time that I was taken with their attention and serious demeanor. This was typical of all classes that conducted interviews.

During her interview, Kaitlin had been telling us about her own bedroom she depicted in her box. She said it was her bedroom in her grandma's house. After a student asked her if her grandma was still alive (she's not), Nathan asks her "did she die on your bed?" Kaitlin says "Yes, but the ambulance brought her back...I had to help pick her up to put her in the ambulance... She passed again at the hospital." Nylaishia then gave what seemed almost a benediction: "I hope... *you have... a great year remembering...*" Nylaishia is a girl who has been repeatedly suspended this year for class disruptions and disrespect to other students and to the faculty (not in my room however). Her empathy for Kaitlin and rapt interest in automobile safety issues was remarkable. I had never seen her come alive like this in the past.

I was debating internally why my students weren't talking about the art or what the box looked like. Instead, the class mainly just wanted the details of the memory. So, I asked a few questions of the class about what the box contained or what they liked or thought students had done well in the design of Kaitlin's box. Timothy answered, "I like the AKA sign you put on the wall. Did your grandma's house have that on the wall in her house?" Kaitlin said "No, she didn't; I just like it." Thomas asks "I love your couch and how you drew the house [on front]."

It seemed to me they were just answering because I asked; there was no passion; only polite questions. When they chose their own questions, it was focused on the memory of the person and if the interior was alike or different from the loved one's original objects in their house.

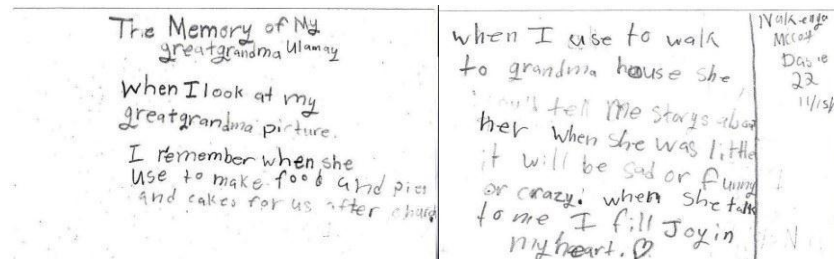
Reflecting later, I tried to decipher my conflicted mental attitude. It seemed past DBAE theory was trying to speak to my mind, and tell me that I was not doing it right. DBAE theory really doesn't give a lot of attention to letting students proceed with their own questions. Instead, I used to keep the focus more on the formal qualities of their work or how it related in style to the artists chosen for the lesson.

Facilitating personal meaning making has never seemed a paramount DBAE issue. Reflecting on my student's amazing attention spans, personal connections and passion for the ideas, I concluded that I had made the right decision facilitating the student's own questions, instead of defining their questions for them in advance.

I continued by reflecting on what I learned in Teaching Art Criticism in my OSU studies. I recalled that a good interpretation was one that answered the questions the viewer was asking to their satisfaction. In addition, it depends on what questions are being asked if it was a good interpretation or not. Since my students were asking questions based on a cultural significance placed on death, I felt affirmed in my decisions for this unit since their questions were being fully answered. A good interpretation also results in meaning making as I discussed in the first section of this essay. We had accomplished this goal as well.

*A joyous heart.* The students placed their card containing their written memories somewhere in their boxes. Nakenya wrote on her memory card, "When I used to walk with my grandma, she would tell me stories about her when she was

little...it will be sad or silly....***it felt to me I 'fill' joy in my heart...***" Her remark seems even more special to me when left written in the language style of a little girl.



Nakenya's Memory Card

***Social justice unit.*** My Social Justice unit focused first on the art and times of the Harlem Renaissance. It flows from the big idea of social change and making a difference. Essential questions included "*How can one person make a difference?*" And "*How can I make a difference in the world by using my talents, like the Harlem Renaissance artists did?*" My fifth grade classes are 100% black. This instruction is important to these learners because I have observed their tendency to display a version of learned helplessness and low self-esteem that often keeps them from excelling and even at times from wanting to try. Most live in the poorest neighborhood in our city that has a violent crime rate 2.6 times the national average. Much of it stems from their neighborhood.

In the past, my students have often spoken out (unsolicited) to the class, of their anger at their perception of social injustice to the African American and to their family

as African Americans. More than once they have burst out in the middle of a discussion on a completely unrelated subject, comments such as "*WHY did you make us slaves?*" I used to wonder how to respond to this. I would think about how I could plan avenues for them to rise above this mindset in the future, but never quite felt I had succeeded.

After my OSU studies in Art Criticism, I designed this unit on the Harlem Renaissance in a way that facilitates my students in reflecting how they themselves can make a difference. They *can* make a difference, in their lives, the lives of those around them, and positively impact social justice. I wanted students to understand that they don't have to be helpless or go through life feeling like a "victim". They can use their personal talents and gifts to make a difference in their lives and in the world, not only for themselves, but also for social justice and civil rights. My hope was that that they would begin to apply it to their own lives like the artists of the Harlem Renaissance did.

Before this time, I had taught an earlier version of this unit. In it I focused mostly on helping my students excel in the arts by focusing on elements and principles, and understanding the Harlem Renaissance artists' styles, such as the collages of Romare Bearden. I now see that I can use art interpretation as a springboard to touch student's lives as well. This in turn will touch their world, as well as their art.

First we discussed the art and times of the Harlem Renaissance. Then we interpreted Bearden's *Summertime* (World Gallery, 2011). I had never used this artwork for the unit before. My students came alive as they interpreted this scene of the streets of Harlem. Their eyes lit up; in previous versions of this unit, this did not



happen. I felt it was because they were making connections with their lives because most of my students also live on streets similar to the ghettos of Harlem.

I asked the students what they saw as we viewed *Summertime*. Ja'leal said "I see the projects". Mahogany said "I saw Harlem when I visited New York last year". I ask "What was it like?" She says "Dirty... dangerous." I ask the class "What does it remind you of?" They answered, "I used to live in a place like that... Old houses and stuff". I ask "What else do you see?" Sokoya says "An eye looking out." I ask "What do you think the person behind the eye is thinking?" He says "She's scared to go out." "Why?" I ask. Jada says "The streets are scary".

"What else?" I say. "The guy in the corner of the picture", Donte says. "Tell me about him... what kind of person is he?" I say. Jaquan says "A gang member." "How do you know?" I say. "He's making gang symbols with his hands... He's evil," he says. "How do you know that?" I say. "He's wearing black and has a mask on" he responds. I said it was a great answer. The students all could give evidence from the art for their interpretations. This was my first time applying these principles; I was pleased with their responses.

Afterward, they designed their mixed-media collages with these questions in mind: "*What do I see when I look out on the 'streets of my life'?*" "*What are my talents and, how can I make a difference in the world with my talents like the Harlem Renaissance artists did?*" I left it open-ended to encourage them to explore how they

thought these questions should be answered. In the past, I would have defined how the questions were to be addressed, so this was a change.

When they were finished, they wrote about the questions and how they showed those things in their art; then share their answers with the class. The answers that students gave when they first wrote about their art were not very clear, so I arranged to conduct small group interviews. I asked students to explain and expand on the answers they had written about.

I chose students for the small group interviews who had written how they could make a difference in a provocative way. Taylor spoke about how her art showed a trip with her family, a nightmare and her running. She said 'My art is about the time I was sleeping and heard gun shots; I was afraid... I don't want others to feel scared like I did'. In her collage, she illustrated her fears about violence against people she cares about. She said, "*I want a CSI investigator career to help the families*" [so that victim's families can find justice].

She now can articulate how she can make a difference in the future with wise career choices instead of just taking whatever came in life. She also spoke "*I will use my singing... to sing about civil rights...*[and that it would cause people] *to get together and maybe they can be free*". Her remarks on civil rights issues are now given in the context of how she is learning she can make a difference and change things.



Taylor's work in progress



Johnathon's work in progress and collage

***Conclusion.*** Teaching in this manner has changed the way that I view art education, specifically art criticism. I have developed a strong interest in including contemporary art and visual culture. "We owe it to our field and our students to study the art of *our* times and to begin... with probing questions and far-reaching goals." (Gude, 2011). My class probably won't become artists, but they will all need to communicate their ideas as democratic citizens contributing to the success of their community. Teaching art criticism in this manner gives them tools to accomplish this goal.

I have come to see the importance of being sure that above all, students are making meaning, not like I did in the past with formal elements and styles. Now, students are interpreting and connecting art with their lives so that it makes meaning for them both artistically and for their future as positive, contributing democratic citizens.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Synthesis and Conclusion**

Key changes have occurred in my understandings about art teaching. Although there are many important changes and ideas that I have learned during my OSU studies, I have picked the ones that have meant the most to me. The first and foremost key change is teaching artmaking with meaning. Then, it includes practicing art criticism from the perspective of personal meaning making. The next key is designing a curriculum that majors on contemporary artists and their practices, and includes visual culture. Finally, creating a classroom that fosters independent, thoughtful, and caring citizens is important.

#### **Teaching Artmaking with Meaning**

I think that this key change is a necessary one for all the others that follow. Now, everything I teach in my art classes is geared for my students to make their own personal connections and to relate it to their lives. This change began with me two years ago when I made the decision to teach ONE unit from the perspective of the big idea, instead of from the questions and focus found in my DBAE curriculum guide. The unit I am referring to is The Harlem Renaissance unit that used the big idea of Social Justice. Essential questions included "How did the Harlem Renaissance artists make a difference [for social justice and in their world] by using their gifts and talents?" and "How can I make a difference [in my life/ in the world] using my gifts and talents?"

My students also used principles of art criticism to respond to Bearden's artwork titled, "Summertime", which depicts ghetto streets similar to my student's

neighborhood. After just this one unit, I was convinced. The difference in my student's attitudes, attention spans and quality of their thoughtful answers was obvious to me.

I then decided to change many of my units that first year to units that were fueled by a big idea that my students could relate to. I also used mostly contemporary artists that I didn't always feel I really understood myself to provide the art criticism lessons of the new units. We learned about these artists together.

This resulted in even more breakthrough in how I felt about these new ways of teaching art. My students opened up to me in some very real ways that not only have improved our relationship, but also generated a much greater and more authentic interest in art class.

Now, my class seems to matter to my students. I remember the first summer at OSU; one quote by Olivia Gude, from her chapter entitled "Investigating the Culture of Curriculum" (Gude, 2000) seemed to say it best. "Recognizing that this may be THE LAST ART CLASS my students will ever take, what do they need to know in order to bring a lifelong engagement with the art of the past and of the unfolding present?" The understood idea to me was "*Will it even matter to them down the road?*" I don't know that I was pleased with how I might have answered the question at that time. Now, I think even my young primary children can tell you why art class matters and what it means to them.

### **Art Criticism from the Perspective of Personal Meaning Making**

I have truly enjoyed the many art criticism lessons I've had a chance to teach since I started the OSU master's program. I wrote extensively on several of my favorite

units in essay two. However, there were many more lessons that I did not mention in the essay, but still reflected a key change from former teaching about past artists and styles to encouraging students in making connections and meaning to the artwork and to their lives.

That first year I experimented with many of the suggested lessons in the "Interpreting Art" text (Barrett, 2003). There seemed to be no weak or wasted efforts. I did notice that art criticism lessons that were part of units that helped students to focus on the big idea over longer periods of time tended to be much more insightful and successful on more than just superficial levels.

### **A Contemporary Curriculum**

I now perceive that my curriculum will not be relevant to today's students if it majors on past art movements and ignores the world my students live in. During my second year of studies in the OSU graduate program, I began to design many new units that featured contemporary issues, thought, and artists. I wrote at length about my favorite new units in essay one. These included Humans and the Environment: *Going Green*, with sixth graders, and Humans and Animals for the first grade and lower Montessori classes. During this recent unit, I saw my very distractible and frequently off-task students come alive and focus on their work in ways I never dreamed I would see.

I used to think that their lack of great interest was because my life world was so different from theirs. However, I now see that I was not connecting with their lives or

helping them create meaning in my curriculum. Instead, I was spoon-feeding them with what I had been taught about art many years ago.

### **Fostering an Independent Learning Community**

Creating a classroom that fosters independent, thoughtful, and caring citizens is an important change. My efforts to achieve this have resulted in an art room that is much different in key ways than previously. These differences were written about extensively in essay one and two so I will only sum them up here.

Instead of a lecturer role, I now strive to be more of a facilitator. I also foster teamwork. During this year's "Can Critter" lesson from the *Humans and the Environment* sixth grade unit, my students worked in teams where they chose which ideas and sketches to use. How to best work together to paint the designs on our paper recycling cans was decided as a team. They made major decisions by voting in their groups. The result of these changes was a thousand percent increase in student motivation, passion, ownership, and excitement. There were few behavior problems.

They really showed me they cared. They cared about the cans, the painting, and how well they were working together. Students were able to give intelligent answers about their art and why what they were doing was important during the in-school TV interviews.

This demonstrated a 180 degree difference from my previous class environment of "Do it for me, please" or, "I don't know why we have to do this" and the ubiquitous implied "I really don't care anyway; I could be home playing video games" types of responses.

**Areas I plan to Continue to Pursue**

While the recent changes to a more democratic process that fosters independent student learning have been very successful, I plan to continue to develop in this area. Also, I want to continue to grow in my role as a facilitator instead of lecturer. I feel I am still growing in these processes; I have not arrived.

Many school issues make it a challenge to fully embrace these changes. Some of these are: shortened (thirty minutes) art class times and an overloaded schedule that can challenge the best of intentions. Also problematic are occasional classes where the classroom teacher struggles unsuccessfully with class management of our inner-city children. Then, they bring their unmanaged class to me to manage. I consider these issues to be challenges to be met, not unassailable roadblocks. There is no going back to the old paradigm.

**Questions I now have about Art Teaching**

One question that I now have about art teaching concerns how to best share what I have learned with other art teachers in my area. I think that helping other teachers to increase in their understanding of these issues can best help me to grow as well. This is because it can be hard to grow in isolation. If my colleagues also grow, we can grow even more together.

I have already shared two of my big idea units at our fall South Carolina Art Education Association (SCAEA) conferences. I am looking for other effective ways to help change the fact that the art education world around me remains focused in the old



mindset. This is the same one that I used to have: a kind of marriage of traditional DBAE and national visual art curriculum standards.

**How can I Best Continue to Grow?**

I believe I can best continue to grow in my new understanding of art education by systematically continuing to apply what I described above. These include sharing my key changes with the other teachers in my district and state, continuing to read and study journals, research articles, websites, and sources that feature contemporary art, artists and their practices. It also includes applying methods of action research to the issues I described that have proved challenging with no easy solutions as yet. I am looking forward to this adventure, and can hardly wait to see what the future holds as I continue to grow.

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